

‘Of Blooded Things: the paintings of Suzi Morris’

by Cherry Smyth

Landscape painters have long tackled the notion of the earthly sublime that awakens both terror and awe with its immense beauty or vast, uncontainable vistas. A key trope of the Romantics, the sublime has since been vigorously interrogated and dismantled, yet the spiritual yearnings that underpin it continue to draw artists to its potential for expressing the ineffable experiences of the human, faced with the wonders of the natural world.

In many ways, the sublime is a genre of the lonely – it is the vision of an individual not a collective, but it is its capacity to speak for the ‘we’ that brings us back to view and review it. It is thanks to artists like Suzi Morris that the concept of the sublime is being refreshed and reinvigorated for a post-Romantic age when the natural world is under such cataclysmic threat, and our atomized lives force a solitude that many would rather avoid. These bold, resplendent paintings explore where postmodern ideas of the sublime survive and thrive in the fields of bio-technology, medicine and science.

Painter Mark Francis found that his interest in mycology delivered a fertile and inventive visual vocabulary that he made his own, blurring the distinctions between figuration and abstraction. It seems that the deeper Morris’ research led her, driven by her own body’s response to viral keratitis, the wider the ideas spread into the microbiological advances in DNA sequencing and the ethics of genomic medicine, the more her style developed and expanded. As poet Jorie Graham puts it:

‘who is that listening, who is it that is wanting still
to speak to you
out of the vast network
of blooded things,
a huge breath-held, candle-lit, whistling, planet-wide, still blood-flowing,
howling-silent, sentence-driven, last-bridge-pulled up-behind city of
the human, the expense-
column of place in

place humming....To have
a body. A borderline
of ethics and reason.' (1)

Morris has coined the phrase 'the viral sublime' for her painterly investigation of viral landscapes, these hidden, almost fantastical worlds that will either support or destroy the organism that hosts them. One of Morris' most powerful and enigmatic paintings, 'The Naked Virus', (2017), perfectly captures the artist's acute understanding of the nature of the virus to act as either as a benign or malicious force that can radically determine our lives. The tender blue-purple hues and the delicate mobility of the brushstrokes invite us into something that seems surprisingly warm and sympathetic. It has the grandeur and elusiveness of the work of Ross Bleckner, a New York painter who was drawn to represent his emotional response to AIDS and loss. Like Bleckner, Morris moves nimbly between a surface beauty and a darker undertow: the healthy-looking body and the unseen deterioration under the skin. Is this sumptuous image in 'The Naked Virus' a ghoul's lair or a regal Jacobean neck ruff? Would the ruff adorn or choke? Are those zombie-like roses tumbling out or into it? There is a smug and chilling omnipotence about its presence – its ability to live without air, to cause death so soundlessly. Morris' ability to hold the poles of viral power to bestow or betray life so in balance is astounding.

There is a similar intensity and sense of utter self-sufficiency to the life form in 'On the Origin of Species, Homage to Darwin,' (2016). In the foreground pulses a coiled form, intestinal in appearance, with the heft of luscious growth. Behind it lingers a shadow cloud of pale green-blue that deepens the painting's perspective and suggests that we could be in either inner or outer space. Beyond that stands the vertical bar, which is one of Morris' trademark interventions. Breaking out of the lyrical, gestural abstraction of the foreground, Morris pulls the vertical line of the modernist heyday out of colour field painting. Artists like Barnett Newman used the vertical stripe to create tension and vitality in the colour field and play out different compositional colour harmonies. Like the first person singular, Morris' 'I/eye bar' acts like a definition of the self, a halt to the proliferation and precious beauty of the virus' life. It becomes a resilient

measuring stick, drawing in the eye, offsetting the seductive but moulding bloom of the lyrical viral life. It seems to say 'I am here too.' It is quite a thing to set up the setting and apparatus of what is seen as an otherworldly sublime and then posit within it an earth-rod mark, a human scale reality, to withstand its potency. Could the vertical bar be perceived as a minimalist figure within the abstract universe?

Morris continues to upend the genres of art history in 'Waiting for CRISPR/Cas9', (2017), where the interruption of the yellow-white bar on the left is magnified and reinforced by the curved grey aluminium canvas on the right of the diptych. The shapes have the look of cross-sections of an organ which also suggests the splicing of CRISPR, the genome-editing technique that could herald a cure to genetic disease. Just as DNA holds a memory bank of remnants of all the viruses that have attacked its bacteria, Morris' work responds to a memory bank of art history in which formalist and abstract tropes are intermixed and revived.

German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote his long series, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, after a friend lost her daughter to a long illness, aged only nineteen in 1922. After reading the girl's journal, he was fascinated by 'the two extreme borders of her pure insight': her pain and suffering matched by her open acceptance and 'the appropriation of herself into the whole, into a far more than her.' (2) Rilke compared the changes wrought by death to a consuming fire that we ironically cannot live without.

'Chose to be changed. With the flame, with the flame be
enraptured,
where from within you a thing changefully-splendid escapes:
nothing whereby that earth-mastering artist is captured
more than the turning-point touched by his soaring shapes.' (3)

The sublime has never been without its concerns – whose sublime is it and who is oppressed or excluded for that vision to exist and persist? By inhabiting the viral sublime of her imagination, Morris' paintings take us into 'a far more than her', an immensely rich seam of knowledge at a new turning-point

in medical science which is rarely represented in visual art. Morris' anti-Romantic reworking of the sublime keeps terror, or at least an unsettling queasiness, in mind, rather than surrender totally to awe and beauty. We are always aware that while the beauty she creates is undeniably seductive, it can be fatal. Morris builds a unique and stunning visual vocabulary out of that dynamic paradox.

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1. Graham, Jorie, 'The Bird that Begins it', from *Place* (London: Carcanet, 2012)
2. Rilke, Rainer, Maria, introduction to *Sonnets to Orpheus*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1946), p.12
3. Rilke, Rainer, Maria, 'Sonnet xii', *Sonnets to Orpheus*, *ibid.*